The Reference Conversation
(a.k.a, What do they REALLY need?)

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The Big Picture…

- All types of libraries have the same mission – to serve the educational and recreational information needs of their users.
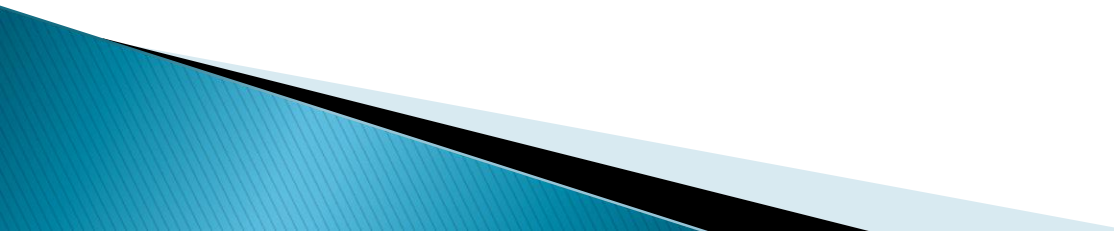 - Reference Services
  - Instruction
  - Referrals

Reference Basics

- Four types of questions

  ◦ Directional
  ◦ Ready-reference
  ◦ Specific Search
  ◦ Research

"The Other Kind…"

- My friend has this book about a kid that saw a dog that did this thing and I think it was blue—do you have it?

- I need information on World War II.

- My professor told me to get a picture book for young adults. Where are they?

Ahh....the "Reference Interview"

"The interpersonal communication that occurs between a reference librarian and a library user to determine the person's specific information need(s), **which may turn out to be different from the reference question as initially posed**....a well-trained reference librarian will sometimes initiate communication if a hesitant user appears to need assistance"

– Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science by Joan M. Reitz, 2007.

Guidelines/Areas (RUSA)

1. Approachability

2. Interest

3. Listening/Inquiring

4. Searching

5. Follow-up

Approachability

- Smile, eye contact

- Acknowledge waiting patrons

- "Reference Presence"

Interest

LISTEN!

- Signal understanding of needs through verbal/non-verbal gestures

- Face patron (not computer screen)

Listening/Inquiring

- Let patron finish his/her statement of need before jumping in or drawing conclusions

- Ask open-ended questions (not "yes" or "no")

- Restate "real" info request and confirm with a closed question

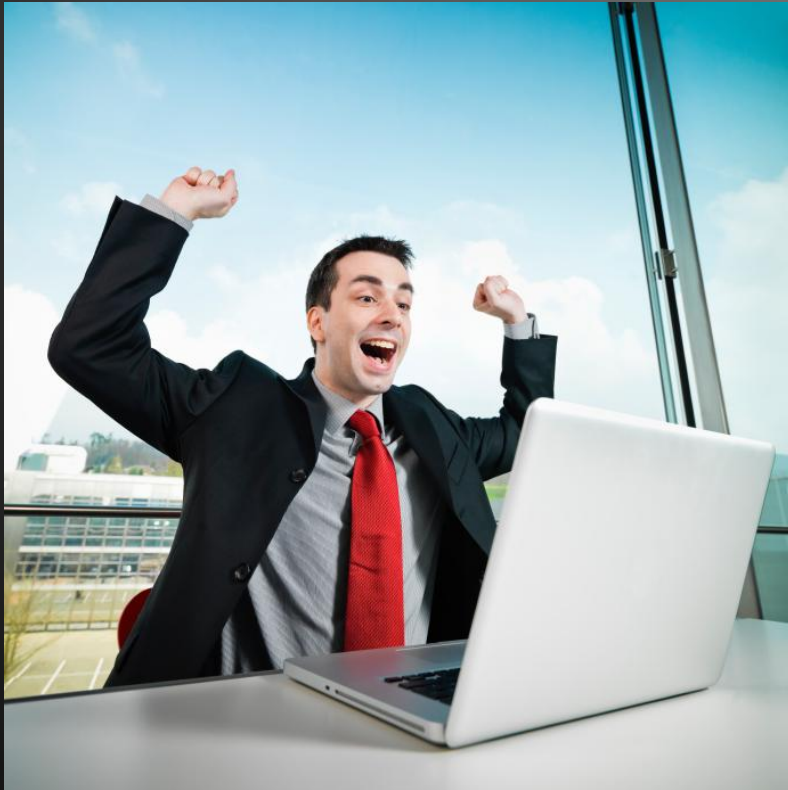# Searching

- Find out what's already been tried

- Stay engaged—explain strategy as you search

- Identify "teaching moments"

- Make referrals when warranted

Follow-up

- Confirm that the user's immediate information need has been met

- "Is there anything else we can help you with today?"

- Roving/mobile check

That's great...in theory...

Potential Hang-ups

- Discomfort with or lack of knowledge about the topic

- Boring/dumb questions

- Identifying a teaching vs. non-teaching moment

Ways to Deal

- Best reason to use reference interview/ conversation technique!

- Track them...they may mean something ☺

- Prioritize – you want them to come back...

…and what about "Virtual" Reference Interviews?

- Different Tactics?

  ◦ Preconstructed messages for greetings/farewells

  ◦ Co-browsing

  ◦ More on that later…

Useful Links

RUSA – Reference Interview Guidelines
http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral.cfm

InfoPeople – Reference Interview Skills for Academic Library Staff
http://www.infopeople.org/training/past/2008/ref-int-acad/

InfoPeople – Reference Interview Skills for Public Library Staff
http://www.infopeople.org/training/past/2008/ref-int-public/

Nebraska Library Commission – Reference Interview Guide
http://www.nlc.state.ne.us/ref/star/interview.html